

collection

3.

Collecting.

The Inflections of a Practice

Curator: Mélanie Rainville

Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery

**Continuities and Discontinuities:
An Evolving Practice**

A curator whose mandate is to build and manage an institution's collection, must, in conjunction with a managing authority and an acquisition committee, select those works to be preserved and bequeathed to posterity. The subjectivity encountered at the heart of the acquisition process comes with a considerable degree of risk for the curator, given his social responsibility of stewarding society's collective heritage. On this subject, Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak write:

error [...] is an occupational risk for the curator, whether the error lies in the authenticity of a work [...] or in its value in the eyes of posterity. [The curator], responsible to the community, will have his competence judged on the equivalence of his choices to the hierarchy of works and artists as established by art history.¹

The occupational hazard the authors mention here refers to errors that can be made in accepting or rejecting acquisitions. The risk is real, but it raises issues about the acquisition of works and the consistency of collections that go beyond the curator's judgment. The latter's role is not solely limited to the selection of artwork for a collection. It is also concerned with the preservation, documentation, and dissemination of works acquired by one's predecessors. The quality of a collection therefore does not depend on the judgment of one person but on the sum of the respective judgments of each of the individuals who participated in its development. It is a collective endeavour. Moreover, collecting projects occur within various contexts that have a considerable impact on the coherence and quality of the selections that they bring together. These contexts are likely to inflect the direction a curator wishes to give to his acquisition program. They may either hinder or facilitate the acquisition of works. They may even become so problematic that a curator will accept works he would have preferred to reject. In these cases, various museum policies governing such

decisions may allow the curator to resist external pressures.

The works an institution acquires therefore reflect the interests and preoccupations of the curators who acted according to particular contexts during their tenures. Contexts change and are influenced by various factors, including the introduction of new legislations, the goals the departments overseeing the collecting institution have set for themselves, and the available human and financial resources. Rooted in these changing contexts, an institution's collecting practices will also change, further impacting the content of the collections. From the point of view of conservation, for example, one observes that recently acquired works on paper are in better condition than those acquired in the 1960s by the University. The condition of a work on paper acquired fifty years ago, which was framed with acid-based materials and subsequently overexposed, attests to methods of framing and of exhibiting that are not recommended by current conservation standards. Moreover, institutions today collect in a more focused manner than previously: their criteria for selection have become more restrictive. The changing nature of collecting practices and contexts heightens the difficulties inherent to the act of collecting because it may put the institution in a problematic situation. Some, having collected using less defined selection criteria, may now find themselves with collections that are too heterogeneous. They may attempt to redirect their acquisition policy in order to tighten their collections, but they must nonetheless preserve a body of work that may not correspond to their new mandate. A similar situation occurs when institutions must preserve works that are in a deteriorated state and with which they can no longer work. In both these cases, museum staff is helpless before these works that now lie dormant. Moreover, these changing factors create a rift between the circumstances in which a collection is examined and those in which the pieces were acquired. It may be difficult to understand what justified certain acquisitions and but it is necessary to recall the circumstances that determined their acquisition. In the end, it becomes a real challenge for an institution to maintain coherence in the development of its collection.

The Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery is an example of a heterogeneous collection that illustrates changing practices and comprises objects of various kinds and periods. Correlating the shifts in context with the content of the collection enables us to understand the impact these ruptures have had on the Gallery's collecting practices. An exhaustive study is outside the scope of this essay, but one can present the contexts in question and some of the aspects that have had an effect on the collection.

Contexts of Acquisition

The first context to address is sociocultural and political in nature. Considered in conjunction with the collection's inception, it informs us of the social transformations undergone in Quebec in the 1960s. The outcome of a commission into the teaching of art in Quebec (*Rapport de la Commission royale d'enquête sur l'enseignement des arts dans la province de Québec*), the Rioux Report, made public in 1969, was the first to define " ... art as a mode of knowledge having a critical function in society." The democratization of the arts lay at the heart of these recommendations, which had the effect of integrating the arts into university studies and of transforming the art milieu through the creation of openly accessible venues for the teaching and dissemination of art. Government support for the arts also transformed the relationship between society and the state through the establishment of programs to aid the production, preservation, and dissemination of art. These unique circumstances alone legitimated the conception and implementation of several collecting projects, including the one at Concordia University.

Another context is the artistic milieu to which the Gallery's acquisition program was responding. The collection was developed in Montreal between 1962 and 2003,² and was always focused on Canadian art. It is interesting to note which aspects of Montreal's artistic practices the Gallery's directors and curators³ chose to represent. The acquisitions reveal an interest in art produced by faculty and students of the university's fine arts department. At other times, however, there was a marked interest for works not produced or exhibited in Montreal. Artistic practices from Toronto, for instance, appear during some mandates.

The collection also reflects a museological context that underwent profound changes throughout the Gallery's development. Collecting practices have changed in tandem with the development of museums in the 1960s, influenced by a range of legislations and organizations created to govern activities related to museum collections. Conservation practices are one example, since they were definitely influenced by the creation of the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), in 1972, and of the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board (CCPERB) in 1977. The first set of amendments brought to the Copyright Act in 1988 also had a significant impact on activities related to dissemination. In short, developments in the museological context led to the professionalization of various collecting practices, as the content of the collection attests.

The institution itself, through its acquisitions policies and its directorial vision, is the most determining context for collecting. Six individuals with different viewpoints

and material resources at their disposal developed the Gallery's collection, and this is reflected in the works acquired during their tenure. The Gallery became independent from the Faculty of Fine Arts in the early 1990s, thereafter benefiting from a director wholly dedicated to the administration and artistic programming of the Gallery. Likewise, in the early 2000s, its staff was augmented with specialized positions, one of which, in 2004, was dedicated to the collection. The Gallery's move, in 1992, to a more appropriate and better equipped space also marked an important turning point in its history. These structural developments have had an undeniable impact on collecting practices at the Gallery.

A university art gallery is unique among collecting institutions, placing it in a fifth context, namely that of its parent institution, the university, a place of learning and research on which it is dependant. In this environment, it is confronted with various issues unrelated to art that position it within a hierarchy of priorities. The University necessarily has authority over the collection, which is an integral part of its cultural heritage. Moreover, various officials within the university may become involved in the Gallery's collecting project by virtue of their status within a department or role on the advisory committee, or, yet still, because of motivations having to do with the strategic priorities of the educational institution. The Gallery's relationship to the university can be problematic at times when the latter's objectives are inconsistent with the Gallery's collecting policies or with the professional standards that govern it. Management and preservation of a university art collection form a unique set of concerns, given its inscription within its parent institution and the involvement of individuals with diverse objectives.

Effects of the Acquisition

The collection is, thus, inscribed in five contextual levels, which, by their transformations, have influenced both the practices and the content of the Gallery's collection. They have provoked discontinuities in its make-up and development: bodies of work out of step with its mandate and its acquisition policy, unevenly preserved works of art, and inconsistent documentation methods. These considerations afford us a better grasp of the collection's heterogeneous nature. Indeed, one may wonder if it would have even been possible to develop a more homogenous collection, given the contexts within which it developed: a university emerging out of unique sociocultural and political circumstances, a gallery with a succession of directors, whose resources varied significantly throughout its history, and the professionalization of museological activities. Thus, we may say that the very nature of collecting in a public framework,

where acquired objects are inalienable, implies a significant degree of risk that must be taken into account when assessing a collection. We must also remember that one's evaluation of the past is done from a contemporary perspective that requires recontextualization, which helps to temper our judgments with a greater understanding of the issues of the day and of prior orientations. And while a collection raises questions about the correlation between its content and the "hierarchy of works and artists as established by art history," we can always turn toward its inscription in the practice of collecting. Indeed, if "it is always relevant to ask if the object is more a memory of the time from which it was selected than of the era it initially represented,"⁴ this equally applies to the collection as a whole.

Mélanie Rainville
Max Stern Curator

Translated from the French by Ron Ross

1- Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak, "Du conservateur de musée à l'auteur d'expositions : l'invention d'une position singulière," *Sociologie du travail*, no 1 (1989): 31.

2- These years correspond, respectively, to the collection's inception and to the declaration of a moratorium on acquisitions.

3- Until the early 2000s, the Gallery's directors also acted as curators of the collection.

4- Jacques Mathieu, "L'objet et ses contextes," *Material History Bulletin / Bulletin d'histoire de la culture matérielle* (1987): 12.

Works exhibited

A Donor

Gerald Gladstone, untitled, 1965
Christopher Gabriel-Lacki, untitled, 1978
Charles Gagnon, *The Fourth Day*, 1963
3 objects of African Art
4 objects of Precolonial Art

Acquisitions and Ethics

Alfred Pinsky, *Hot Day*, 1963
Alfred Pinsky, *Bridge in Saskatoon*, 1958
Edwy Cooke, *The Egg Machine*, 1955
Edwy Cooke, *Triptych - New York*, 1952
Edwy Cooke, *Midwestern Cityscape*, 1951
Edwy Cooke, *King and Courtiers*, 1956-1958

Acquisition Sources

Unknown artist, pitcher and glasses, 1899
Unknown artist, pitcher and glasses, 1978

Selecting Acquisitions

Rita Letendre, *Koumtar*, 1974
Rita Letendre, *Om*, 1969
Rita Letendre, *Twilight Phase III*, 1972
Rita Letendre, *Zahara*, 1973
Rita Letendre, *Tecumseth*, 1977
Rita Letendre, *Sharon*, 1973
Rita Letendre, *In Space*, 1969
Jacques Hurtubise, *Rosa Rose*, 1974
Jacques Hurtubise, *Alice*, 1973
Jacques Hurtubise, *Alabama*, 1973
Jacques Hurtubise, *Annie*, 1973
Jacques Hurtubise, *Dolichita*, 1975
Jacques Hurtubise, *Diloulou*, 1975
Jacques Hurtubise, *Draka*, 1975
Anne Savage, untitled works, n. d.
Barbara Steinman, *Of a Place, Solitary*, 1989
Serge Tousignant, *Le long voyage*
(reproduction - petit format), 1986

Exceptions in Acquisition Practices

8 objects of African art
18 decorative arts objects
131 objects of Precolonial Art
2 objects of Roman art

Effects of Conservation Practices

Stanley Lewis, *Head*, 1950
Claire Hogenkamp, *I Smoke Them Because I Like Them*, 1965
Robert Roussil, *Forme humaine*, 1958-1959
Marianna Schmidt, *Prognostic*, 1967
Estelle Hecht, *Journey to the Unknown*, 1963
Alex Colville, *Snow*, 1969
Josef Albers, *Soft Edge - Hard Edge*, 1965
Jack Shadbolt, *Mykonos No. 3*, 1962
2 objects of Precolonial Art

Lost or Misplaced Works

Photographic prints
Archival documents

Orphaned Works

Ellemere (?), *The Breast of the W(?)*, 1968
Garthwaite, *Alberta Series*, 1979
Joan Rankin, *Amare V*, n. d.
Mwanili, untitled, 1968
Unknown artist, untitled, n. d.
Guy Robert, untitled, 1960

Inconsistencies in Documentation

Nancy Herbert, untitled, 1972
Archival documents

Donors

Normand Bernier, Richard Buchanan, Catelli Food Products Ltd., Compagnie B. K. Johl and A. Gordon and sons, Mr. and Mrs. Alec Dollin, Rolla and Peter Freygood, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Froster, Mrs. T.W.L. MacDermot, Christian Mailhot, Jacques Mailhot, Paul Mailhot, Pierre Mailhot, May Company (Dept. Store), Doris and Mulla May, Bernard Pesner, Alfred Pinsky, Kate and Don Pooley, Toba Ram, Salvatore Randaccio, Mr. and Mrs. Lou Ritchie, Roll, Harris and Company, Samuel Schecter, Jack and Sybil Smith, Blema and Arnold Steinberg, Mr. and Mrs. Maurice E. Thomas, Toronto Dominion Bank

COLLECTION 3

January 9th to February 13th 2010

COLLECTION is an exhibition program that explores in-depth different aspects of the Permanent Collection.

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art gallery